

To God's Holy People in Bemidji

Ephesians 1:1-14

May 15, 2016

I'm excited to begin a spiritual adventure with our church through the New Testament book of Ephesians. Ephesians was written to encourage God's people to embrace His plan for them.

Ephesians 1:1-2 will be our focus this morning. Let's dig in. **Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus.** An apostle is "one who is sent", one who proclaims the gospel as Christ's delegate, his authorized agent or representative. In **Ephesians 2:20** Paul tells us that God's household is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone."

Wow, that's pretty cool. I wish that our church had an apostle. I wish God would send an Apostle up here to Bemidji on a missionary tour. That'd be nice. What would have been really great is if the Apostle Paul would have written a New Testament letter called "Bemidji." Let's come back to that in a little while...

Ephesians 1:1 goes on to say **by the will of God.** And so we see that Paul wasn't running around on his own doing whatever he wanted. Rather, by the very decree of God, Paul was sent. God's choice and purpose and determination were behind what was happening; it was a deliberate initiation of God's power and plan.

Now, here is a key point that we're headed for. I realize that none of us here would consider ourselves to be an Apostle. But, we should consider ourselves to be "ones who are sent by the will of God." As much as we may understand our own free will to make choices in this life, we must also understand that the sovereign and powerful plans of God are at work.

Two weeks ago Scott Engelstad was speaking at my installation service. I wrote down something he said: "God provided a Lead Pastor but He also provided you, the Congregation." That's exactly right. All of us have been sent by the will of God. **God is at work in the lives of His people.**

And that's the very next line in our text, **To God's holy people.** Note that little possessive ' mark; that little tiny dash between the "d" and the "s." As followers of Jesus, we belong to God; we are His holy people. And that is something we should not take lightly. We are loved, cared about, chosen, and made holy. We are part of something special when we are one of God's people. We've been dedicated and consecrated to the service of God because we are in special relationship to Him.¹

Some Bibles translate "God's holy people" with the word "saints."² And this is a good translation. However, I think that in our day and age we tend to understand the word "Saint" as someone who is among the very elite people of God. Many of us, including me frankly, feel unworthy of this kind of a title. "Saint Jerry," that's not me! The Saints sound like an exclusive group. But, the group that Paul wrote to in Ephesus were not some ultra-elite Saints who all had perfect walks with God. No, I assure you these were pretty normal humans.

The evidence for this is woven throughout the book of Ephesians:
In **Ephesians 2:2-3** we read about their former life of sin when they "followed the ways of this world" and gratified the cravings of their flesh.
In **Ephesians 4:2** we read Paul urging them to bear with one another. Apparently, the Ephesian believers weren't always so "saintly" to be around! Perhaps some of us live in a house where the saints who live there are very, shall we say..., human.

In **Ephesians 5:3** there is a strong warning against sexual immorality and impurity which are "improper for God's holy people." Do saints really struggle with impurity? Apparently the ones in Ephesus did!

"God's holy people" is not so much about their current state of holiness as their special relationship to God. And so, as we take this journey through the book of Ephesians, don't expect to hear about perfect people. Expect to hear about people who were in process; people who were under construction and figuring out life and faith day by day. People... just like you and me.

¹ In rendering οἱ ἅγιοι it is important to avoid an expression which means 'sanctified,' for the focus is not upon a particular state of holiness, but upon a special relationship with God. Those who are spoken of as οἱ ἅγιοι may also be admonished to become sanctified. In a number of respects, οἱ ἅγιοι is similar in meaning to λαός 'people of God' (11.12) and to ἀδελφός 'fellow believer' (11.23). Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 124). New York: United Bible Societies.

² See KJV and ESV.

These people lived in a place called **Ephesus**.³ Ephesus is a place you can find on a **map**. Over on the west side you'll see good old B-town in northern MN. If you head east about 5,755 miles, you can visit the ruins of Ephesus in modern day Turkey. The Ephesians were real historical people set in a particular time/place. This gives us the language, grammar, and context we need to understand the original message of Paul's letter to them.



The Bible you have in your hands today is different than a book like the Book of Mormon, for example, or many other books out there which lack support. The Bible, on the other hand, has all kinds of support and reliable evidence from historical records, archeological digs, and so on.

Ephesus was a **real place** with **real people** who were figuring out **real faith in Jesus**.

In fact, Ephesians 1:1 refers to them as **the faithful in Christ Jesus**. They put their faith in Jesus. They trusted Him and confessed Him as Lord. But once again, let's be careful. By calling them "faithful" here, Paul is not saying that they were perfectly reliable and always trustworthy. Rather, his focus is on the faith they had in Jesus, that they were believers in the Good News of the gospel. He is not suggesting that they never struggled.

The reason I'm pounding away at this point is that as we journey through the book of Ephesians, we need to understand that the Christians that Paul is writing to were everyday people; they did not have their faith perfectly figured out. **They were simply clinging to Jesus and trying to walk with Him daily.**

In **Ephesians 4:29-31**, they are given instructions about not stealing, about cleaning up their unwholesome talk, and about "getting rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice." They were **full of faith** in Jesus but their lives were also **full of mistakes** and struggles.

In **Ephesians 5-6**, Paul lays out instructions about how they can work on their relationships; between husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves. Their faith was fully in Jesus, but I can assure you that spiritual life in the church in Ephesus was **messy**.

In **Ephesians 1:2** Paul begins his greeting with grace. Grace is such a great way to begin any conversation. A community of **Grace** is one that wishes others goodwill. It's desiring God's divine favor and benevolent disposition toward someone. This greeting of "grace" is the same grace Paul will use in **Ephesians 2:5** where he declares that God, "made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by **grace** you have been saved."

To this greeting of grace Paul adds **and peace to you**. A greeting of peace is our wish for someone else's state of well-being. This common greeting in NT letters, combines the Greek greeting "grace" with the Hebrew greeting "peace" and then links them to the one true source for each.

In other words, **true grace**, God's unmerited favor, only comes through the Lord Jesus Christ and His work on the cross.

And, **true peace**, our "total well-being and security," only comes through the Lord Jesus Christ and His work on the cross.⁴

If you are not experiencing this grace and peace in your life today, make sure that you talk to somebody about that. Before we go any further in our journey through Ephesians, make sure that you say "yes" to the grace and the peace that are offered by God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul then says **from God our Father**. Don't miss the ramifications of this little word "our;" this possessive 1st person plural pronoun! Paul is saying that he has the same father as they do. It's like he's aware of the fact that he's not from Ephesus, but he's still their brother in the Lord.

It doesn't matter so much where I live or where I come from; I'm not pulling rank on you guys by calling myself an Apostle. What is really important is that we have the same dad and the same Lord! We are fellow believers and we are family.

Paul finishes his greeting with **and the Lord Jesus Christ**. Each of us has 3 names as well: our last name connects us with our family of origin, our first name differentiates us within that family, and our

³ a seaport of Asia Minor in the plain of the Caÿster River. Famous for its temple of Artemis. Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 418). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁴ NIV 2011 Study Bible note, p. 1890.

middle name is often connected with some significance. My middle name for example comes from my grandpa, Allen.

Paul recognizes three things here:

1. They serve the same **Lord**. Lord = Master, He is the one who owns their very lives.⁵
2. They have faith in the same **Jesus**. Jesus = “the one who saves.”⁶
3. They believe in the same **Christ**. Christ = Messiah, The Anointed One.⁷

After looking closely at the opening verses of Ephesians, I find myself still asking one very important question: **What does this have to do with me?** Here we have this great man of God named Paul who is writing to all these Christ followers in Ephesus, but so what? What does a letter written 2,000 years ago have to do with my life today in Bemidji? Good question.

Aren't we just reading someone else's mail? It makes me think of the book, “**Letters from a Skeptic**,” by Greg Boyd. Greg and his father, Ed, were on opposite sides of faith: Greg being a brand new Christian and Ed being a longtime agnostic. This book contains their letters back and forth between father and son. The book is a fascinating read. These letters weren't originally intended to be read by other people. Or, perhaps they were. Perhaps the Holy Spirit, **who is omniscient**, knew all along that others would need to read these letters as they wrestled with faith in Jesus.

Now, I'm not suggesting that what Boyd writes is on the same level as the inspired Word of God. I'm just saying that it's a good illustration of how “reading someone else's mail” can be used by God for people other than the originally intended audience.

In a related note, if we dig a little more deeply into the background of Ephesians, we find various clues that Ephesians was not actually written to the Ephesians. At least, not to them alone. It turns out that there is strong evidence to support the fact that Ephesians is what we call a circular letter. Now, this doesn't mean the letter was round!

What this means is that Ephesians was very likely intended to be read not only by the Christians in Ephesus but also by the surrounding churches in Asia Minor and beyond.⁸ If you look on a **map**, you'll see other places like Smyrna, Thyatira, and Laodicea. God's people living in these places read the letter to the Ephesians as well. Frankly, this seems to be the case with most, if not all, of the New Testament books; they were shared and passed around.



But, Ephesians in particular ends not with a list of personal greetings to specific names of believers in Ephesus but rather with a general greeting “to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.” **Ephesians 6:24** So it seems that Paul has a much broader audience in mind. This idea is broadened even further by the fact that when Paul uses the term “church” or “ecclesia”⁹ in Ephesians, the context shows that he is not so much talking about the church as a local gathering of believers, but rather the Universal Church.¹⁰ The **Universal Church** is the grand sum of all of God's people stretching around the world and throughout all of time. It's interesting to note that all 9 times Paul talks about the “church” in the book of Ephesians, he points “to the Christian community in its totality.”¹¹

For example, **Ephesians 1:22-23**, “And God placed all things under [Christ's] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the **church**, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” Certainly Christ was the head of the local church in Ephesus. But, He is also the head of every local church that meets in His name, including EFC Bemidji. Jerry Johnson is not the head of this church! **Jesus Christ is the head of this church!** And, as Christ-followers, we are a part of the same body that the Christ-followers who lived and worshiped in the city of Ephesus were 2,000 years ago.

⁵ Paul talks more about this later in 6:5-9 where he refers to them as “slaves of Christ” who share God as their Master.

⁶ See Mt. 1:21

⁷ This is particularly powerful when compared with Eph. 2-3 where Jew and Gentile are reconciled in Christ.

⁸ Asia Minor Map is from the Standard Bible Atlas, p. 43

⁹ The word “church” or “ἐκκλησία” is where theologians get their word “ecclesiology” which is the study of the church.

¹⁰ It's actually often quite difficult to distinguish precisely in the NT when an author means specifically a local gathering and when the Universal Church is intended. In fact, we may actually be creating false categories when we try to distinguish the two. You'll see this struggle show up in lexicons. A lexicon is basically a Bible dictionary for Greek and Hebrew words. The people who write these lexicons have a difficult time allotting which instances of the word ecclesia go to which category. O'Brien quoting RTR on the bottom of p. 27 in The Letter to the Ephesians.

¹¹ All 9 references to the church in Ephesians point to the church in its totality. Lincoln, *Theology*, pp. 92-93. (Eph. 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32)

I began this message saying how incredible it would be if the New Testament had a book called Bemidji? “To God’s holy people in Bemidji, the faithful in Christ Jesus.” Wow. What do you think it would say? ...I think it would say what a lot of New Testament books say. It would point us to Christ. It would warn us about sin. It would commission us to live out our faith by loving the lost and pursuing righteousness.

You see, this is the point. We don’t need an individual letter to every single local church around the world in order for us to determine God’s plan for us. We just need to pay close attention to the books of the Bible we do have. We need to study them carefully, understand them in their original context, and then pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us in applying those truths to our present-day life and ministry.

2 Tim. 3:16-17 tells us that, “**All Scripture** is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, **so that** the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

When Paul is writing to the church in Ephesus, he is writing to a specific gathering of God’s holy people in a specific geographical region. But, he is also writing his thoughts in the larger scope for the Universal Church. In His foresight, the HS knew that we’d be reading over Paul’s shoulder and so He made sure Paul included what we’d need to know in the year 2016.

Ephesians 3:21 hints toward this, “to [God] be glory in **the church** and in Christ Jesus **throughout all generations**, for ever and ever! Amen.”

Therefore, we are part of something really big, something timeless, something global, and... something amazing! Imagine what heaven will be like when we gather as the Universal Church, when we combine the 8:30 and 11:00 services, when we combine people from every tribe, tongue, and language in one voice and worship one Heavenly Father in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. How awesome will that be!?

Hebrews 4:12 tells us that: The word of God is alive and active. It’s sharper than any double-edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Brothers/Sisters in Christ, let’s dig in to God’s Word and embrace His plan for our church!

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